

Burnout Education: The Relationship of Personal Life to Work Life

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Keywords: Burnout; personal life; work life; segmentation; compensation; synergy; radiology; radiologists

Discussions of morale and burnout in radiology typically focus on the work life of radiologists. We assess factors such as the intensity and duration of work, its impact on the health of patients, and the amount of red tape radiologists deal with on a daily basis. However, work is only part of a health professional's life, and for many radiologists, life outside of work also influences overall fulfillment. To gain a truly comprehensive view of the matter, it is necessary to consider the relationship between work and personal life.

Psychologists often conceptualize such matters in terms of work satisfaction and life satisfaction, typically construing satisfaction in one of two ways (1). The first way of thinking about satisfaction relies on a hedonic conception, derived from the Greek term for pleasure. A hedonic view of satisfaction says that people seek to attain pleasure and avoid pain. The other perspective on satisfaction is eudaemonia or flourishing, the extent to which people perceive that they are doing and living well. Because most radiologists do not work to have fun, we adopt the latter approach here.

Segmentation, Compensation, and Synergy

This is the author's manuscript of the article published in final edited form as:

McLuckey, M. N., & Gunderman, R. B. (2018). Burnout Education: The Relationship of Personal Life to Work Life. *Academic Radiology*, 25(8), 1097–1098. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acra.2018.02.021>

Broadly speaking, there are three different models for thinking about the relationship between fulfillment in work and life (1). The first, sometimes labeled the segmentation hypothesis, posits that the two are unrelated. People can be miserable both in work and in life, miserable in one but fulfilled in the other, or fulfilled in both, but how a person feels about one of the domains offers no insight into their experience in the other. On this view, those seeking to enhance fulfillment in work would be wasting their time to concern themselves with fulfillment outside of it.

There is some evidence for the segmentation hypothesis. For example, each of us can probably think of colleagues who seem quite happy with their work lives but are miserable at home, just as we can think of others who are happy at home but miserable at work. In the aggregate, however, there seems to be little empirical support for the view that work and life fulfillment reflect different factors. Most studies suggest that the two are correlated with one another, whether negatively (the compensation hypothesis) or positively (the synergy hypothesis) (1).

The compensation hypothesis holds that low levels of fulfillment in one part of life spur efforts to increase it in the other. If radiologists are unhappy at work, they will try extra hard to find happiness in activities and relationships outside of work, whereas if people are unhappy at home, they will exert themselves more to find fulfillment at work. This hypothesis makes sense, at least to the extent that the people who are unhappy in one domain might spend more time and energy in the other, if for no other reason than to avoid the domain of life in which they are unhappy.

One unfortunate implication of the compensation hypothesis, at least among employers, would be to seek out job candidates who are unhappy with their home lives, in hopes that they will devote more time to work. Again, however, there is relatively little empirical evidence to support the compensation hypothesis. Although many people are relatively fulfilled in one domain and unfulfilled in the other, studies have failed to demonstrate any causal association (1). It would be a mistake to assert that making people miserable in one domain increases their fulfillment in the other.

The third model, and the one for which empirical studies offer most support, is the synergy model. It suggests that in broad terms, work fulfillment and life fulfillment are positively correlated with each other. Someone who is happy at home is, all other things being equal, more likely to be happy at work, and someone who is happy at work is, all other things being equal, more likely to be happy at home. Of course, the fact that the two are positively correlated does not prove that either is the cause of the other.

A noncausal explanation for the positive correlation might be the personalities and general life outlooks of subjects. For example, people who are happy in any domain may tend to be happier in all domains, just as people who are unhappy anywhere are more likely to be unhappy everywhere. Of course, there is also the possibility that the one is the cause of the other, or that each acts as a cause of the other, and that making someone happier in one domain is, on balance, likely to provide them with a greater sense of fulfillment in the other.

Suppose people who are happy at work are more likely to be happy in personal life. If this were true, leaders could do their colleagues a bigger favor than they might suppose by helping them to enhance their work satisfaction. On the other hand, suppose people who are happy in personal life are more likely to be happy in work. If this were true, leaders might initiate and redouble efforts to provide colleagues with work experiences that do not undermine and perhaps even enhance life satisfaction, such as good recreational opportunities and ample paid time off.

Fostering Relatedness

The positive correlation between work and life fulfillment may also reflect deeper truths about the human psyche. At least three important needs may be operating in both, which have been identified as autonomy, competence, and relatedness 2, 3. In both domains, we may need to feel that we have some choice about what we do; that we are relatively good at what we do; and that we are part of relationships that matter both to us and to others. This psychological perspective suggests that recognizing and addressing such needs in both domains are important. Here, we focus on relatedness.

What does it take to foster a sense of relatedness? One key factor is communication about personally important matters (4). Hearing someone say, “You never tell me anything” is both a strong indicator that a relationship is in trouble and a stressor on the relationship in its own right. People in strong relationships—romance, friendship, marriage, and so on—want to share their experiences with one another, and the realization by one person that the other is not doing so is likely to be accompanied by a sense of abandonment. A highly compartmentalized life spells trouble.

A second and highly related factor is the sharing of activities. Relationships are built and maintained by doing things together, and if the parties in a relationship spend little or no time engaged in shared activities—hiking, cooking, entertaining, and so on—the relationship is very likely to suffer. This places a premium on ensuring that workers avoid being out of town so much or spending so much time at the office that they have little or no time to share activities with the important people in their life. Likewise, people need sufficient time to build relationships in the workplace.

Another key factor in relatedness is feeling understood and appreciated. It is difficult or impossible to attain any degree of depth in a relationship when one person does not know the other's hopes and fears, likes and dislikes, and basic biographic details—in short, when two people do not know one another. Likewise, when one person feels known by another, it is important to feel that such knowledge contributes to a sense of affection and commitment. People who do not know and appreciate one another cannot develop a very deep relationship.

A final factor is a desire to avoid arguments and interpersonal conflict. When the forces pulling a relationship apart exceed those keeping it together, the relationship is in trouble. A state of perpetual conflict is a likely indicator of impending failure. This is not to say that strong relationships are void of disagreement and conflict, but such discord needs to be counterbalanced by attractive forces. A limited degree of disagreement can be good for a relationship, because it makes clear that each person is taking some risk to be open and honest with the other.

Conclusions

Efforts to reduce burnout and enhance morale among radiologists are unlikely to be successful if they attend only to the domain of the workplace. Radiologists experiencing discouragement need to examine both spheres of life and how they interact. Radiology leaders need to recognize that workplace conditions that undermine the quality of radiologists' personal lives are likely to damage morale and camaraderie. Human beings are fundamentally relational creatures, and our well-being hinges powerfully on the quality of the relationships that make up our lives.

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